

# Without an end in sight: Competition between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union during the Vietnam War and its implications for the wider relationship

How did competition between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union in the Vietnam War influence wider Sino-Soviet relations?

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Between the escalation of fighting in Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident and the conclusion of the Paris Accords in 1973, the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union competed for influence over the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). The two countries used tools such as military advice, aid, personal relationships and polemics to gain a privileged relationship with the DRV. This was an endeavour at which both sides failed, for as Ilya Gaiduk (1996) argues, DRV leaders succeeded in resisting outside influence. This is an indication that Sino-Soviet competition in Vietnam was not of pivotal significance in the wider relationship between Beijing and Moscow. Two questions then emerge: firstly, what were the motivations behind Sino-Soviet competition in Vietnam? Secondly, what would have happened had the two countries not competed in Vietnam? Chen Jian and Yang Kuisong (1998) have noted that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Mao often used foreign policy to fulfil domestic goals, while Nicholas Khoo (2010) has argued that China engaged in Vietnam to counter potential encirclement. Odd Arne Westad ("Sino-Soviet Alliance" 1998) and Lorenz Lüthi (2012), meanwhile, have argued that the Soviet Union targeted Asia as an opportunity to establish influence to counter US power in Europe. The motivations for competition were part of a dynamic that extended beyond Vietnam. An analysis of developments in bilateral relationships beyond Vietnam similarly shows that events external to Sino-Soviet competition there influenced the direction of relations.

Following clashes along the Sino-Soviet border from March 1969, the Beijing leadership was stricken by what Yang (2000 21) calls a "war scare". This fear of conflict with Moscow drove Chinese leaders to adopt a new outlook on Sino-US rapprochement. In that sense, the breakdown in Sino-Soviet relations was due to factors beyond Vietnam. There was no meaningful shift in Sino-Soviet relations during or after Vietnam, so bilateral competition in Vietnam had limited impact on the wider relations between the two countries. As Chen and Yang have hinted, the deterioration in relations was inevitable even without developments external to Vietnam. Simply put, the Sino-Soviet relationship

was stricken by a fundamental clash in ideology and worldview. As Westad (“Sino-Soviet Alliance” 1998) argues, the pairing was held together only by a mutual perception of the United States as a shared enemy, and once this perception ceased to exist, a recovery in the relationship was highly unlikely. Due to these fundamental issues, there were slim odds that competition for influence on the DRV between the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China would significantly alter the course of their relationship.

One of the most prominent areas of competition between the Soviet Union and China during the Vietnam War occurred in the area of war strategy. In the earlier stages of the Vietnam War, when most support received by the DRV military had come from China, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had practiced Mao’s concept of “People’s War”, which relied on small arms and promoted guerrilla warfare. This concept was upheld by the DRV as late as summer 1962, when Ho Chi Minh and NVA General Nguyen Chi Trinh visited Beijing to request a shipment of 90,000 rifles (Qiang 116). However, by the mid-1960s, there was growing doubt regarding this warfare concept. Thus, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin’s visit to Hanoi in February 1965 marked what Khoo calls a “turning point” (2010 21) as Hanoi became “interested in adopting a more aggressive strategy against the United States that... relied on more advanced and heavier weaponry”. The pivot was consolidated in April, when Vietnamese Communist Party Central Committee General Secretary Le Duan went to Moscow and agreed a deal for Soviet missiles (Khoo 2010 21). From then until 1968, there was a fundamental conflict between the war strategies recommended to the DRV by Moscow and Beijing. In April 1968, representatives from the DRV agreed to join negotiations in Paris, adopting the strategy of “negotiating while fighting” advocated by Moscow. While this tactic was distinct from the recommendations of either the USSR or the PRC, Chen Yi had told Le Duc Tho during talks on 17 October 1968 that the PRC would break off diplomatic ties with the DRV if it did not suspend ties with the USSR and withdraw from the Paris negotiations (Chen 233). Thus, the USSR had brought the DRV to the negotiating table against PRC wishes, “a coup of sorts for Moscow” as Khoo (2011 53) argued.

Nonetheless, the Chinese froideur toward the Paris talks only lasted until 17 November, when Mao gave his support to the talks (Chen 221). By this point, the basic conflict between the war strategies recommended by Beijing and Moscow had been resolved. Lüthi (2009 66) argues that from then on, both the USSR and the PRC adopted a “dual strategy” of offering both rhetorical and material aid to the DRV, which was increasingly opting for high-risk, high-intensity warfare strategies, while pushing for a return to negotiations. Once Mao indicated his support for the DRV entry into negotiations, there was more unity than discord in Sino-Soviet recommendations for DRV war strategy during the Vietnam War. Thus, it had limited permutations for wider Sino-Soviet relations.

## Methods of competition in Vietnam

In December 1964, when Beijing and Hanoi concluded an agreement which stipulated that Chinese artillery and infantry personnel would be deployed to the DRV to counter the increasing threat of US attack on North Vietnam. From this point, Beijing and Moscow turned to aid in their attempts to curry favour with the DRV. In February 1965, Kosygin stopped in Beijing on his return from Hanoi and proposed, among other things, that Moscow and Beijing coordinate aid to the DRV under the principle of “united action”. The PRC, rejecting this principle, consented to non-military Soviet aid being transported by air, but restricted military hardware to a limited land corridor and also placed

tight restrictions on the number of Soviet personnel permitted to accompany aid transiting China. The situation was compounded on 3 April when a Soviet request for 4,000 troops to be permitted to travel through China to the DRV was rejected (Khoo 2010 17). In the aftermath of Kosygin's visits to Hanoi and Beijing, the competition over aid intensified. On 8 April 1965 (Chen 218), Liu Shaoqi told Le Duan: "It is the consistent policy of the Chinese party that China would do its best to provide whatever was needed by the Vietnamese". Le responded by requesting troops, pilots and engineers. According to Xie Yixian, up to 170,000 Chinese troops were deployed in the DRV at any one time between 1 August 1965 and 20 March 1969 (Khoo 2011 24). Further talks in the months that followed between Ho Chi Minh and Mao in Changsha and between Van Tien Dung and Luo Ruiqing in Beijing indicate the seriousness the PRC leadership placed on the issue of aid to the DRV. While Soviet aid initially faced Chinese obstructionism, Douglas Pike had calculated that the total amount of Soviet military and economic aid to the DRV between 1965 and 1968 was in excess of \$2 billion (Khoo 2010 22). The USSR and the PRC were fighting an aid race in the DRV.

A key juncture in this aid race presented itself in the form of the DRV's entry into peace talks in Paris, in April 1968 (Khoo 2011 45). The Soviet Union had urged the DRV to enter negotiations following the temporary cessation of US bombing, while the PRC maintained that an attritional Peoples' War would be the surest course for victory. The DRV's decision to opt for "negotiating while fighting" led to a boost in aid from the Soviet Union, but also had damaging consequences for Chinese aid, which Chen Yi attempted to use in the following months to persuade the DRV to suspend peace talks (Khoo 2011 55). While Mao issued his support for peace talks on November 17 1968, China delivered only 1/3 of the aid that it had promised for the first half of 1969 (Khoo 2011 54), while between November 1968 and 7 July 1970, all Chinese troops in the DRV were withdrawn (Khoo 2011 55). It would seem that this gave the USSR the upper hand in terms of influencing the DRV leadership.

On March 5 1971, Zhou Enlai (Lüthi 2009 61) visited Hanoi and told DRV officials, "Whatever you need, please request it... we do not hesitate to assume the greatest national sacrifice". The subsequent resumption in large-scale aid to the DRV was motivated by a desire to counter the increasing imbalance between Chinese and Soviet influence in the DRV. Between 1971 and 1975, an average of 41.5% of China's aid budget went to the DRV, while in 1972, a full 48.67% of Beijing's largest foreign aid budget since 1949 went to Hanoi (Lüthi 2009 74). Zhou refused renewed Soviet proposals for "joint action" on aid, citing "historical reasons" —a reference, according to Lüthi (2009 61), to the Sino-Soviet split. However, this was no more than political rhetoric. Throughout the course of 1972, China and the DRV agreed a number of deals permitting military and economic aid from fraternal parties including the Soviet Union to transit China (Khoo 2011 76). Particularly noteworthy was Chinese approval for Soviet helicopters to be stationed in Guangdong, and for aid ships to use Chinese ports, proposals that had been strongly opposed by the Chinese leadership when Kosygin first suggested them in 1965. Thus, by 1971-1972, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, both keen for the DRV to continue negotiations in Paris but also intent on maintaining public support for their Communist ally, were in broad agreement on the previously divisive issues of war strategy and aid.

Despite the development of this alliance of convenience, both sides continued to seek other means of establishing unitary influence over the DRV. Beijing in particular attempted to develop influence by maintaining personal relationships with the DRV leadership. In the early stages of Sino-Soviet competition in Vietnam in 1965, Zhou hosted Ho Chi Minh and DRV Prime Minister Pham

Van Dong in Beijing on several occasions (Khoo 2010 31). Each time, he told them of his concerns regarding Soviet aid and personnel in the DRV. These attempts to use personal relationships to drive a wedge between the DRV and Moscow were ineffectual, as Le Duan went to Moscow in April 1965 to negotiate a missile deal. Nonetheless, these visits, along with Beijing's decision to invite Le Duan, Le Duc Tho and Pham Van Dong in close proximity to the visits by Kissinger and Nixon in 1971 and 1972 (Lüthi 2009 75) indicate an intent to engineer a privileged relationship with the DRV leadership, even if it was not an effective exercise.

The two countries also turned to polemics to develop a privileged relationship with the DRV. From 1962-1963, Moscow and Beijing criticised one another's divergence from Marxism-Leninism (Chen and Yang 276), while China criticised the USSR for its "revisionism". This language permeated Sino-DRV dialogue over the course of Sino-Soviet competition, with Le Duan (Chen 214) expressing his fear to Mao in August 1964 that "The Soviet revisionists only want to use us a bargaining chip". Similar phrasing appeared in meetings between Mao and Pham Van Dong in October 1965 and September 1968 (Khoo 2011 53). This rhetoric also influenced Chinese anti-Soviet propaganda on the Vietnam issue, which criticised insufficient Soviet support to revolutionary national liberation movements. In the early stages of Sino-Soviet competition in Vietnam, Chinese polemics had some effect, as Kosygin called for a cessation of polemics during his February 1965 visit to Beijing (Khoo 2010 17), but ultimately, like attempts to build personal rapport with DRV leaders, the deployment of polemics brought no discernible privileged relationship with DRV leaders, because the goal for which both nations strived, namely unitary influence over the DRV, was an imagined property. As Gaiduk (247) concludes, "Skilfully manoeuvring between the Chinese and the Soviets, Hanoi preserved its independence in formulating its political aims... Moscow had no monopoly in Vietnam; its influence was shared with Beijing throughout the war".

Thus, during Sino-Soviet competition in the Vietnam War, Beijing and Moscow reached agreements on divisive issues such as war strategy and aid. The competition for influence over the DRV had a longer course and only ended after the 1974-1975 Sino-Vietnamese split. Nonetheless, there was no observable success by either side in gaining sole influence over the DRV leadership during the Vietnam War. Chen (211) has argued that Chinese involvement in Vietnam amounted to a "litmus test" for "true communism", but there ultimately no result. This indicates that the influence this episode had on wider Sino-Soviet relations is strictly limited. Instead, it is better to view Sino-Soviet competition in Vietnam as a manifestation of wider issues in the bilateral relationship that in many cases existed before and after the Vietnam War.

## Reasons for Sino-Soviet engagement in Vietnam

Indeed, an analysis of Chinese and Soviet motivations prior to the Vietnam War shows that wider issues led both countries to compete in Vietnam. Chen Jian (2001), Yang Kuisong (2000) and Zhai Qiang (2000) have all argued that at various junctures under Mao, the Communist leadership used foreign policy to achieve ulterior domestic motives. Zhai (221), for instance, cites the 1958 Taiwan Straits Crisis as an effort to generate momentum for the Great Leap Forward, while James Gao (2004) has argued that the Resist America, Aid Korea campaign was important in swaying the last converts to Communism. Thus, the 1964 Resist America, Aid Vietnam and the Third Front campaigns, both of which generated momentum for continuous revolution prior to the Cultural Revolution, fall within the wider context of foreign policy agendas designed to meet domestic policy goals. In as far as

China's engagement in Vietnam was motivated by the need to instil continuous revolution at home, it is a manifestation of a wider issue.

Aside from using foreign policy to achieve domestic goals, an equally important consideration was forestalling the encirclement of China. In the 1960s, the United States stationed troops in South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines and South Vietnam, and thus, as Zhai (219) argues, "Chinese leaders' apprehension of a U.S sponsored encirclement made them prize the geopolitical value of Vietnam". The intensification of American military action in Vietnam following the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Incident raised fears of the war spilling over into southern China, and thus Beijing's decision to send up to 170,000 troops to the DRV in 1965 was motivated by a desire to maintain a buffer between US forces and Chinese territory. While China's motivation for involving itself militarily in the Vietnam War later changed from combatting the threat of US encirclement to counteracting the possibility of total land encirclement by a Soviet-led bloc, it was motivated to engage in Vietnam by pre-existing security concerns.

In the initial stages of the Cold War, the main security concern for the Soviet Union, as Westad ("Sino-Soviet Alliance" 166) has argued, was the build-up of American power in Western Europe and East Asia. Thus, the general motivation of Soviet policy towards Asia was to build a network of allies which could collectively withstand American influence. Indeed, this was part of the initial rationale behind Comintern support of the CCP. Through the Cold War period, the USSR also cultivated ties with countries such as North Korea, Mongolia, India and North Vietnam, and attempted to consolidate this collection through unsuccessful attempts at constructing a regional security alliance. While Lüthi (2009 73) is not wrong in arguing that Moscow "arm[ed] Hanoi in order stay in the diplomatic game in Indochina", its reasons for competing with China in Vietnam stretched well beyond this corner of Asia. Sino-Soviet competition in Vietnam occurred to motivations with roots well beyond Indochina.

## Ramifications of competition outside Vietnam

Having established that Soviet and Chinese engagement in Vietnam was driven by pre-existing motivations, this essay will now consider whether Sino-Soviet relations would have taken the same course without the Vietnam War. During the late 1960s, the most important issue in bilateral relations was not the Vietnam War but rather the militarisation of their shared border. From at least 1966, when the USSR and Mongolia concluded a mutual defence treaty (Khoo 2010 9), China perceived the USSR as a security threat. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 heightened Chinese suspicion of the Soviet Union, and the shift became irreversible following military build-up on the Sino-Soviet and Sino-Mongolian borders from 1969, which resulted in serious clashes at Zhenbao Island in March 1969 and at Tielieketi in August 1969. Following the Tielieketi clashes, suspected KGB agent Boris Davydov asked State Department official William Stearman (Lüthi 2012 390), "Point blank what would the US do if the Soviet Union attacked and destroyed China's nuclear installations?". This enquiry was relayed by Kissinger to the Chinese leadership (Khoo 2011 83). The result of this was that through the autumn and winter of 1969-1970, Chinese leaders became increasingly convinced that a Soviet nuclear attack was imminent. This fear peaked on October 20, when the Chinese leadership evacuated its compound at Zhongnanhai (Lüthi 2012 393). When a Soviet strike did not materialize that winter, tensions abated somewhat, and the Chinese leadership returned to Zhongnanhai in March, but according to Khoo (2011 83), "Recent research had indicated



that the possibility of a Soviet strike on Chinese nuclear facilities existed as late as 1973". Gaiduk (226) has argued that Brezhnev never planned on turning nuclear threats into reality, but this misses the point. The nuclear brinkmanship changed Chinese threat perceptions so fundamentally that the border region remained a key security concern for both Moscow and Beijing as late as 1976 when both countries had roughly 300,000 troops stationed on their respective sides of the borders (Khoo 2011 110). The militarisation of the border continued well after the end of the Vietnam War, with the deployment in 1978 of intermediate-range ballistic missiles in the Soviet Far East (Khoo 2011 2010). The threat perception shift that China experienced in the mid-to-late 1960s was the result of tensions on the Sino-Soviet border, and was consolidated by further developments in this area. Sino-Soviet competition in the Vietnam War, which had no influence on China's basic perception of the USSR as its number one enemy, was a manifestation of their deteriorating relationship between the two countries.

Alongside shifting threat perceptions, another key issue in Sino-Soviet relations was the prospect of encirclement. Events on the Sino-Soviet border caused China to shift from fearing US encirclement to fearing Soviet encirclement. The question, then, is did Sino-Soviet competition in Vietnam counter the possibility of encirclement? Due to the lack of large-scale commitment of Soviet forces to Vietnam, the Soviet ability to deploy large numbers and high qualities of forces and personnel to China's border was unhindered throughout the Vietnam period, and militarisation of the Sino-Soviet border only truly eased when the crumbling USSR commenced large-scale withdrawal of its troops from Mongolia in 1989 (Radchenko 197). However, the threat of encirclement did not come only along China's borders. Advances in US-Soviet détente also increased China's international isolation. The Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, concluded in 1972, escalated fear in Zhongnanhai of isolation. In his 1974 *Three Worlds* speech at the United Nations General Assembly, Deng Xiaoping expressed his concern about the threat posed by Soviet-US strategic weapons limitation (Khoo 2010 108), which was subsequently labelled in the 9 August 1976 Peking Review as "a means of attack, a lethal weapon that kills insidiously". (Khoo 2010 109) In March 1969, following the announcement by Nixon of the stationing of a new anti-ballistic missile system designed to counter any threat posed by China or the USSR, Mao had said to Zhou (Lüthi 2012 383), "We are now isolated. No one wants to make friends with us". This statement belied a fear that had been true before the Vietnam War and remained valid after the Vietnam War due to the combination of border tension and Soviet-US détente. Sino-Soviet competition in Vietnam brought no relief to the threat of encirclement facing China.

## An alliance destabilised: fundamental differences come to the fore

An analysis of developments in Sino-Soviet relations indicates that border conflicts and encirclement fears had more influence on bilateral relations than competition in Vietnam, but there was something deeper driving the developments: Sino-Soviet relations were afflicted by an intractable distrust. Within the confines of the Communist period, distrust emerged during the Chinese Civil War, when Comintern only decided to support the CCP due to American support for the GMD. Even at this stage, as Niu Jun (72) has argued, "The CCP leaders did not truly trust the Soviet Union". Following the establishment of the PRC, Soviet indecision over air support for Chinese forces fighting in Korea (Chen and Yang 254) also stoked Chinese distrust of the Soviet Union. Tensions intensified following Stalin's death in 1953, as Mao's failure to report the purge of USSR ally Gao Gang to Moscow until two weeks after Gao's death in 1954 (Chen 64) intensified Soviet suspicion of the

PRC. Distrust abated from the autumn of 1954, when Khrushchev visited Beijing and agreed to give up vacate Soviet bases at Lüshun and provided loans and technical support (Chen and Yang 257). The distrust entered a deeper stage of dormancy when China and the Soviet Union concluded a deal for Soviet assistance for China's nuclear program in April 1955 (Chen and Yang 258). As Chen and Yang (1998 258) argue, "it seems that the years of 1954 and 1955...should be regarded as the golden age of the Sino-Soviet alliance". But the dormancy of bilateral distrust did not last. In 1956, issues such as Khrushchev's Secret Speech and the Polish and Hungarian crises caused latent tensions to bubble to surface. These tensions surfaced prominently in 1958, when Soviet Defence Minister Rodion Malinovsky proposed a jointly-operated, high-powered radio system and a united nuclear submarine fleet. Mao perceived this as an attempt to gain military control over China and vetoed the proposal. As the Chairman himself recalled (Chen 75), "the overturning or [our relations with] the Soviet Union occurred in 1958, that was because they wanted to control China militarily". This distrust played a large role in the escalation of the Sino-Soviet border crisis of 1969, and also explains Chinese hesitance regarding the transit of Soviet supplies through China to the DRV. The militarisation of the Sino-Soviet border until at least 1976 is a further indication of the endemic nature of Sino-Soviet distrust, distrust which had serious ramifications for Sino-Soviet interaction during the Vietnam War.

The endemic distrust was rooted in fundamental clashes of both ideology and worldview. While both countries subscribed to a broad interpretation of Marxism-Leninism, their approaches to this ideology were very different. In the Soviet Union, revolution came from the urban proletariat, whereas in China it came from the rural populace. There were basic differences on matters such as class analysis, military strategy and organizational structure, with Khrushchev telling Herbert Hoover in 1958 that the Peoples' Communes in the PRC were "reactionary" (Chen and Yang 272) while Mao (Hershberg at al 8) criticised the USSR for its "capitalism". This discord continued well after the death of men such as Khrushchev, Mao and Zhou, when Zhao Ziyang realised on a trip to Europe that "the root of China's problem was in an autarchic system copied from the Soviet matrix". (Zubok, no pagination). Ideological discord manifested itself in Vietnam, as strong debates broke out over war strategy, but these debates were only a reflection of a longer-standing ideological divide. As Westad (Introduction 30) argues, the fact that both sides placed enormous value on their individual ideologies but never developed a joint ideology is critical to explaining the demise of the Sino-Soviet alliance which was cursed from the beginning.

Further sealing the fate of this doomed relationship was a fundamental clash of worldviews. Both the USSR and China viewed themselves at the centre of their imaginations of the world. Certainly on the Chinese side, this vision had its roots in the imperial system of rule, whereby foreign relations were conducted on the basis of external states paying tribute to China. Thus, a permanent source of conflict between the USSR and China, especially following Stalin's death. Mao's fury at Khrushchev's reference to the "Camp David spirit" at the PRC's 10th anniversary celebrations in 1969, noted by Chen (80) was due to his view of Khrushchev as an unruly vassal. Similarly, when Mao subjected Soviet ambassador Pavel Iudin to a monologue on his objections to Malinovsky's proposed joint radio system and submarine fleet, he spoke as the emperor would to a delegate from a tribute state. As Chen and Yang (269) observe, "Throughout the talk, Iudin seemed like the head of a foreign tribute mission who was receiving the teachings of the 'son of heaven'". This fundamental clash of worldviews caused intense rivalry in any theatre where the Soviet Union and China sensed an opportunity to assert influence, including in Vietnam. There was also the complicating impact of the victim mentality which took hold of the Chinese leadership following World War II, the last

stage in China's so-called "Century of Humiliation." The victim mentality meant that China's leaders were afflicted by a consistent paranoia which was so severe that when Kosygin visited Beijing in September 1969, there were fears that his plane was a "Trojan horse" carrying Soviet invaders (Khoo 2011 58). The conflict between Chinese and Soviet worldviews meant that neither side was ever comfortable with each other's involvement in the Vietnam War. It was only natural that they would find themselves in competition.

Given that the Sino-Soviet relationship was stricken by fundamental and ultimately intractable problems, why did the two countries form an alliance in the first place? As Westad argues convincingly, both countries were united in opposition to the United States, first when it aided the GMD in an ill-fated attempt to establish a non-Communist China, and later when they shared a mutual fear of rising US influence. The Sino-Soviet alliance was dependent on a common enemy. As Westad ("Sino-Soviet Alliance" 166) argues, anti-systemic alliances such as this are dependent on a common perception of the enemy, a perception which is prone to changing over time. On the one hand, US failures in Asia, from the GMD's evacuation to Taiwan, to the stalemate in Korea, to Vietnam showed that the US did not pose a serious threat to China's territorial integrity. On the other hand, Soviet attempts to build power in Asia, including in Indochina, traditionally regarded by China as part of its sphere of influence, caused China to perceive an ever greater threat from the Moscow. These dual processes meant that after the 1969 border clashes, the foundation of the Sino-Soviet relationship, namely a common perception of the US as the greatest enemy, was dead in the water. Sino-Soviet competition in Vietnam was rooted in existing frailties within the bilateral relationship, but if the Vietnam War had not happened, it is highly unlikely that Sino-Soviet relations would have taken a significantly different course.

## Conclusion

Following the escalation of fighting in Vietnam in 1964, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China competed in a number of areas. Both countries advised the DRV on matters of war strategy. The PRC advocated an attritional, guerrilla-centric Peoples' War while the Soviet Union, in contrast, favoured a maximalist approach which prioritised heavy, mechanised weaponry. Moscow also promoted the concept of "negotiating while fighting" as part of its efforts to bring the DRV to negotiate with the US in Paris. Beijing fiercely resisted this move before acquiescing in November 1968. The two countries also competed over aid in the aftermath of Tonkin, as China placed tight restrictions on Soviet aid transiting China. Both sides also attempted to use aid to influence DRV decision-making. The Soviet Union increased aid to the DRV to win its support for the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, while China threatened to withdraw aid in a bid to force the DRV to pull out of peace talks in Paris. What both sides were really competing for in Vietnam was influence. Aside from aid, other tools implemented by both sides include the maintenance of personal ties with DRV leaders, and the use of polemics against one another. However, as Gaiduk (247) argues, the DRV was highly resistant to the competition for influence between China and the USSR<sup>1</sup>.

As there was no discernible winner in this competition, other than the DRV, it had strictly limited ramifications for the wider Sino-Soviet relationship. Thus, this essay contends that bilateral competition between Moscow and Beijing in Vietnam was a manifestation of existing tensions within their relationship. These tensions were driven by the motivations of both countries. For

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1 Gaiduk.



China, these motivations included using foreign policy to achieve domestic political goals such as popular mobilization and countering the threat of encirclement, first by the US and later by the USSR. For the Soviet Union, the primary motivation was to balance US power in Europe by building influence in Asia. These motivations indicate that the Vietnam War was only one pawn in the wider competition between China and the Soviet Union.

The combination of border clashes and a downgrading in the mutual threat perception of the US meant that by 1969, the Soviet Union and China were each other's foremost enemies. Competition in Vietnam was merely fuel on a fire that was already burning. Furthermore, the Soviet-Chinese relationship suffered from endemic distrust, stemming from a clash of both viewpoints and ideologies. The Sino-Soviet relationship was built on the unstable foundation of a mutual perception of the US as the greatest enemy. When this perception shifted, as Arne Westad ("Sino-Soviet Alliance" 180) has argued, there would be no recovery for the relationship between Moscow and Beijing. In that sense, it is improbable that Sino-Soviet relations would have taken a markedly different course had the two countries not engaged in competition during the Vietnam War.

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